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'THE PROBLEM OF LIFE': LATER WITTGENSTEIN ON THE DIFFICULTY OF HONEST HAPPINESS

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> 'But philosophy is after all perhaps only the recognition of the abysses which lie on each side of the footpath that the vulgar follow with the serenity of somnambulists.' – Georges Sorel[1]

0. INTRODUCTION: THE PERSONAL AND THE UNIVERSAL

In GH von Wright's 'Preface' to *Culture and Value* – his anthology of Wittgenstein's miscellaneous remarks – he describes his principle of selection as follows:

> 'I excluded from the collection notes of a purely 'personal' sort—i.e. notes in which Wittgenstein is commenting on the external circumstances of his life, his state of mind and relations with other people… Generally speaking these notes were easy to separate from the rest and they are on a *different* level of interest from those which are printed here.' (CV x)

It seems to me, however, that precisely when you get to the most personal sections of Wittgenstein's writings – those diaries in which he lays bare his soul and records his spiritual struggles most nakedly – it is hardest to draw a line between the personal on the one hand, and the philosophical and universal on the other. For Wittgenstein thought that the struggles he was undergoing were struggles that every serious and honest person *ought* to be going through too. Wittgenstein once said to Rush Rhees that 'whether you tr[y] to keep from it or not, your own difficulties and conflicts [a]re bound to appear in what you are writing in philosophy.'[2] And the same was certainly true the other way round as well: Wittgenstein was a philosopher through and through, and therefore constitutionally incapable of keeping philosophy out of his reflections on his inner life.

In this paper I would like to examine Wittgenstein's thoughts on the most central and unifying of his inner difficulties – namely, what in February 1937 he called 'the problem of *my* life' (PPO 169; my italics). On other occasions Wittgenstein spoke of 'the problem of life' *simpliciter* (e.g. TLP 6.521, & CV 6), as a universal problem, without the first-person possessive. I think that a helpful way to approach Wittgenstein's understanding of the nature of the universal problem of life, however, is to begin by examining the specifics of how he saw what was so problematic in *his own* life, and from there to move on to thinking about the degree to which that problem might be generalized to some or even all other people.

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[1] Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. TE Hulme (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1925), 6.

[2] Rush Rhees, 'Letter to Maurice O'Connor Drury (November 6th 1966)', in The Rush Rhees Collection, Richard Burton Archives, University of Swansea, call mark: 'UNI/SU/PC/1/1/3/4'.

In what follows, therefore, I will chart the following course: First of all – in §1 – I will illustrate the nature of the problem of Wittgenstein's own life as he understood it in his later period. Next – in §2 – I will show how his considerations about the problem of his own life naturally opened up towards factors that would be relevant to everyone's lives. Then – in §3 – I will defend Wittgenstein's claim that there really is a significant universal problem here, against what is probably the principal potential objection that might be levelled against the existence of the problem. Finally – in §4 – I will conclude with a few words about the difficulty of truly facing the problem that Wittgenstein describes, given its power to radically destabilize our lives. Unfortunately, examining and evaluating Wittgenstein's cluster of proposed *solutions* to the problem of life will have to be left for another occasion. In this paper I hope only to convince you that there is a genuine need for some sort of solution, because Wittgenstein has identified a real and serious problem.

1. THE PROBLEM OF WITTGENSTEIN'S LIFE: THE INSIDIOUS POISON OF ANXIETY

What, then, was the problem of Wittgenstein's life? In the 1937 diary entry from which I quoted above, he glossed his reference to the problem of his life by saying: 'I am not good & not happy' (PPO 169). Thus it seems that the problem of Wittgenstein's life had two aspects. And indeed, sometimes rather than talking about a single problem of life, Wittgenstein referred to 'the problem*s* of life' in the plural (e.g. TLP 6.52 & CV 84; my italics).

The relationship between Wittgenstein's not being good and his not being happy, however, is a complex one – and I will not be able to explore both these aspects of the problem here. In what follows I will therefore concentrate on Wittgenstein's complaint that he is not happy. Let's ask, then: why was Wittgenstein so unhappy in February 1937?

The best source we have for understanding Wittgenstein's state of mind at this time is Manuscript 183, commonly known as the 'Koder Diaries'. This manuscript notebook contains entries – including many very personal ones – dating from 1930-32 and from 1936-37. The diaries reach their climax in February 1937 when Wittgenstein underwent the peak of a spiritual crisis, alone in his Norwegian cabin.

On reading the diaries, one of the chief themes that emerges – speaking to Wittgenstein's unhappiness – is that of his *anxiety*.

Let's take his relation to his philosophical work as an example. As is surely true of a lot of people, Wittgenstein alternated between two states in this regard. The first was that of being unable to work, or at least being unable to work well. Unsurprisingly, Wittgenstein often found this condition to be acutely painful. Thus, for example, in March 1937 he wrote: 'In a hideous state of mind: Without any thoughts, gaping vacantly… I am here in the wasteland without rhyme or reason. As if someone had played a joke on me, brought me here & left me sitting here' (PPO 217).

But of course these states of inability to work alternated with times when he could work, and indeed could work well. The 1930s was, after all, a phenomenally fruitful decade for Wittgenstein's philosophizing. We might think, then, that in those periods during which Wittgenstein was able to work, he would be free from the 'hideousness' of his sterile periods.

But this was not so. For when he was able to work – rather than enjoying it, being excited by it, or even just being satisfied – he was instead mainly plagued by the anxiety that this ability might falter again at any moment. Thus, just a little earlier in the same day in March 1937, when he was actually working fairly well, he worried:

> 'Will it be granted to me that I keep working? I work, think & write some daily now, most of it only tolerably good. But is that now the draining away of this work or will the brook continue to flow, & swell? Will the work so to speak lose its meaning? I do not want that; but it is possible!' (PPO 217)

The same proneness to anxiety dogged him in connection with his lectures too. Thus in October 1930:

> 'When something is wrong with me like today's sore throat I get very anxious right away, [and I] think, what'll happen if it gets worse & I need a doctor & the doctors here are worthless & perhaps I must cancel my lectures for a long time etc.' (PPO 63)

Again and again, we find that – at times when things were going well with his philosophical writing and teaching – Wittgenstein would be possessed by a terrible anxiety about the possibility of the imminent collapse of this good fortune: 'Before my lectures I am always anxious even though so far it has always gone quite well. This anxiety then possesses me like an illness' (PPO 37).

2. MOVING TOWARDS THE UNIVERSAL PROBLEM OF LIFE: FROM ANXIETY OVER PHILOSOPHICAL WORK TO ANXIETY OVER EVERYTHING

Wittgenstein's obsessive anxiety over the possibility of having the tools and talents necessary to his philosophical vocation taken from him, however, did not remain contained. Rather, it often snowballed into a much more general anxiety:

> 'I am very often or almost always full of anxiety… It always strikes me frightfully when I think how entirely my profession depends on a gift which might be withdrawn from me at any moment. I think of that very often, again and again, & generally how *everything* can be withdrawn from one & one doesn't even know what… one has & only… becomes aware of the most essential when one suddenly loses it. And one doesn't notice it precisely because it is so essential, therefore so ordinary.' (PPO 9-11; my italics)

Indeed, imagining the things that might be 'withdrawn from' him, and the ways in which they might be so withdrawn, came exceedingly naturally to Wittgenstein.

On the one hand these anxieties could be of a fairly common sort, such as worry about the loss of loved ones. Thus, for example, on noting in his diary in April 1930 that he has received handkerchiefs from his girlfriend, Marguerite, for his birthday, and how pleased he is at this, he seamlessly and immediately – and with no particular prompt – segues into the reflection that '[o]f all the people now alive the loss of her would hit me the hardest' (PPO 11). This morbid thought was completely unprovoked – or rather, was provoked by nothing other than by his being happy. Thus, even when he was contented in his relationship with Marguerite, her potential loss was constantly on his mind.

On the other hand, however, Wittgenstein's anxieties could also be of a far from common sort. For his talent for noticing the background conditions of our forms of life, conditions that are so ordinary that they are therefore often most hard to see (BT 300 & PI §129) – a talent that he used with such power in his philosophy – was just as potent in uncovering those unnoticed conditions upon which most of us obliviously depend for our basic equilibrium, but which we could so easily lose. Consider, for example, this particularly horrific insight from January 1932:

> 'Mutilate a human being all the way, cut off his arms & legs nose & ears & then see what remains of his self-respect & of his dignity & to what extent his concepts of such things still remain the same. We have no idea how these concepts depend on the ordinary, normal, condition of our body. What becomes of them when we are led by a leash with a ring through our tongues & tied-up? How much of a human being then remains in him? Into what sort of state does such a human being sink? We don't know that we are standing on a high and narrow rock & around us chasms in which everything looks completely different.' (PPO 147-9)

The most basic tolerability of our lives depends on our retaining at least some remnant of dignity and self-respect, but – observes Wittgenstein – it is terrifyingly easy for a person to be robbed of these. In fact, all one needs to do is watch the news to be confronted with actual cases of people being mutilated by others almost beyond human recognition, or of prisoners being fundamentally humiliated, even by being led

around on a leash. The point here is that these are not difficult realities to actualize, and yet their actualization would utterly destroy most of us.

Thus, even when we stand in a tolerable reality, we are surrounded by vast expanses of logical space, the actualization of which would make life a living horror – and as Wittgenstein observes, for the most part we are completely oblivious to this fearsome logical geography: "We don't know that we are standing on a high and narrow rock & around us chasms" (PPO 149). Wittgenstein, however, tended to notice these chasms, and to brood upon them.

This brings us to Wittgenstein's identification of what is perhaps the most subtle of those preconditions of a minimally tolerable life that usually go unnoticed due to their very essentiality. In February 1937 – that month of profound crisis and illumination – he observed in his diary that:

> 'A human being lives his ordinary life with the illumination of a light of which he is not aware until it is extinguished. Once it is extinguished, life is suddenly deprived of all value, meaning, or whatever one wants to say. One suddenly becomes aware that mere existence—as one would like to say—is in itself still completely empty, bleak. It is as if the sheen was wiped away from all things, [everything is dead… One has then died alive][3]… Really, the horrible that I wanted to describe is that… 'There is no blessing with anything.' … Why does it say: 'The Lord is wrathful.'[4]—He can ruin you. Then one can say that one is descending to hell… You hang trembling, with all you have, above the abyss. It is horrible that such a thing can be.' (PPO 207-9[5])

A month later, in March, he returned to describing this condition. This deadness and emptiness was not merely an absence of good-feeling, but rather, a state of pain and suffering that was positively felt in its own right: 'Have been sleeping quite badly for a few nights & feel dead, can't work; my thoughts are dim & I am depressed but in a glowering way' (PPO 235).

William James once tried to make the same point by stressing that serious melancholy is more than just an 'incapacity for joyous feeling', but rather, is 'a positive and active anguish'[6]. As Wittgenstein said, until a person has experienced the ground of all sense, value, and bearableness in their life collapsing beneath them, and experienced how when that is gone life can become a positive torment to its unlucky bearer, it is very hard to realize or even acknowledge that such a ground is needed at all. For it is usually simply taken for granted that living in itself is a basically tolerable or even enjoyable matter, as long as nothing particularly bad is happening. But once one has experienced the loss of that ground of life's tolerability – as, for example, is often experienced by those who have suffered from severe depression – one becomes all too aware of how very thin the mysterious divide is between a perfectly pleasant life and one of unremitting anguish.

Importantly, it is possible for those of otherwise robust mental health to nonetheless gain an appreciation for how close even they are to such states of anguish, and for how very easy it is to tip over the edge of the abyss that Wittgenstein insists we are all hanging over – namely, by means of certain psychedelic drugs. Sam Harris describes this very well:

> 'My 'bad trips' were, without question, the most harrowing hours I have ever endured, and they make the notion of hell… seem perfectly apt… On my first trip to Nepal, I took a rowboat out on Phewa Lake in Pokhara, which offers a stunning view of the Annapurna range. It was early morning, and I was alone. As the sun rose over the water, I ingested 400 micrograms of LSD… For the next several hours my mind became a perfect instrument of self-torture. All that remained was a continuous shattering and terror for which I have no words.'[7]

From these bad trips Harris drew the following very relevant conclusions:

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[3] Wittgenstein crossed out the words enclosed here by square brackets.

[4] See, perhaps, the Book of Nahum 1:2.

[5] Wittgenstein crossed out the lines from 'everything is dead' to 'full truth either', but I have reinstated them.

[6] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985), 124.

[7] Sam Harris, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 194-6.

> 'There is no getting around the role of luck here. If you are lucky, and you take the right drug, you will know what it is to be enlightened… If you are unlucky, you will know what it is to be clinically insane. While I do not recommend the latter experience, it does increase one's respect for the tenuous condition of sanity…'[8]

Once the veil has been pulled back, and a person has seen how little it takes to hurl them – sturdy mental constitution and all – from the side of sanity to the side of dark insanity, it is hard to forget how close that other state lies, even when one no longer inhabits it.

Those who have suffered from severe depression – or even just from a harrowing drug trip – have had revealed to them just how tenuous life's tolerability is. And having recognized this radical tenuousness they might well find it difficult to rest easy, even when life is fine. After all, what is to stop the ground of life's tolerability from giving way at any moment?

This was precisely Wittgenstein's situation, renewed and intensified each time he noticed yet another way in which the bearableness of our lives is dependent on yet another rickety support. He was continually compelled to say: 'I feel a dependency which I hadn't recognized before… That which was firm for me seems adrift now & capable of going under' (PPO 189).

And the recognition of the profound ricketiness of his situation kept on provoking in him renewed anxiety, fear, and sometimes terror – even when things were ostensibly going well.

After all this, it should not come as a surprise to find the following staccato sentences in Wittgenstein's November 1946 notebook. They could acts as a bullet-point summary of the core of the universal problem of life as Wittgenstein saw it – namely: 'The fundamental insecurity of life. Misery, everywhere you look' (CV 63). This misery, presumably, was disjunctive in nature: either what was valuable in people's lives had collapsed and they suffered because of that, or else it had not, but then they might nonetheless suffer from the very natural and not unreasonable anxiety engendered by worrying about if, when, and how the collapse might happen. Both disjuncts of this miserable dilemma are undergirded by the single fact of life's fundamental insecurity or fragility: the fact that absolutely everything we value can so easily 'go under'.

Note that this insight is no longer limited to Wittgenstein's personal circumstances – to the fact that his philosophical talent was particularly prone to disturbance or that Marguerite was less invested in their relationship than he was. Rather, Wittgenstein's observations have broadened out to universally applicable factors about the fragility of the often unobserved conditions that make *any* life good or bearable.

To sum up – and to perhaps bring a little more order to these reflections – it seems that we might characterize what Wittgenstein calls 'the problem of life' in three increasingly broad ways:

- At its narrowest, the problem of life might simply be the fact that (i) our lives and all their goods are fundamentally fragile and insecure.
- Taken somewhat more broadly, the problem might be considered to include the fact of fragility plus the two further considerations that (ii) we can be, and often are, aware of this fact; and that (iii) awareness of this fact all too naturally – and not unreasonably – tends to lead people to react with anxiety, fear, and even terror.
- At its most capacious, the problem of life might be taken to include the three considerations already mentioned, along with the conclusion that (iv) many people's lives will therefore often involve alternating swings between, on the one hand, periods when things are going badly, and on the other hand, periods when things are ostensibly going well, but which are undermined by anxiety over how easily they could collapse. The result is that for these people, life is never going well – because the bad is bad, and the good is poisoned by anxiety.

[8] Ibid, 189.

If we are to be able to think in an orderly manner about whether or not there is a solution to the problem of life then it will be most helpful to take it in this last, broadest, four-point form. Points (i) to (iii) should then be seen as necessary conditions for the unfortunate alternating result described in (iv). Thus, in order to try to rid ourselves of the problem, we will need to undermine one or more of its three conditions.

There are two kinds of undermining that we could engage in: *theoretical* on the one hand, and *practical* on the other. A theoretical undermining would deny the truth of a given one of the three points, whereas a practical undermining would grant its truth but seek to overturn it, to make it no longer true. In other words, theoretical responses to the problem of life deny that there is a problem at all, while practical responses grant that there is a problem and turn their attention to trying to solve it. Thus, for example, a theoretical response might deny that life really is as fragile as Wittgenstein claims it to be, whereas a practical one would suggest various ways in which life could perhaps be stabilized so as to make it less fragile than it currently is. Or a theoretical response might deny that we are ever really aware of life's fragility in the way that Wittgenstein describes, whereas a practical one might recommend that we distract ourselves from our awareness of life's fragility by means of entertainment or medication. [9]

The bulk of Wittgenstein's discussions of the problem of life were practical in orientation – exploring and experimenting with numerous potential ways to try to solve what he took to be a significant existential challenge. But before it can make sense to examine his practical responses, we must first be sure that the problem is real and not merely apparent. In the next section, therefore, I will turn to what is perhaps the most basic *theoretical* attack on the problem of life as Wittgenstein formulated it.

3. IS LIFE REALLY AS INSECURE AS ALL THAT? AND IS ITS INSECURITY REALLY SIGNIFICANT ENOUGH TO BE WORTHY OF SUCH GREAT ANXIETY?

At this point, then, we must ask: Is life really quite as insecure as Wittgenstein makes out? And is its insecurity really as significant as he seems to think? If not, then Wittgenstein's problem of life will not gain much purchase. Perhaps Wittgenstein's writings on these matters are less the result of an accurate appreciation for how things actually are, and more a manifestation of some kind of hypochondria or gratuitous morbidness on his part.

One fairly natural way to react to Wittgenstein's claims, after all, is simply to observe that while, of course, there are many ways in which one's life might possibly be undermined at any given moment, the chances of this happening – especially in its most radical forms – are relatively slim, and therefore oughtn't to be taken to be of such awesome significance. Even if we take the possibility of my life, one day, simply losing all its sense and becoming a horrific burden to me – something which actually does happen to ordinary people all too often – what are the chances of it happening to each of us, right now? The fragility of life should not be measured according to what is logically or metaphysically possible, but rather, according to how likely it is that the worst will *actually* befall me. And judging by how seldom truly devastating and irreparably terrible things happen to those around me, this does not seem all that likely. Certainly not likely enough to constitute a major and constant existential crisis.

How would Wittgenstein respond to this line of thought, and defend the truth and relevance of his claims regarding the fundamental insecurity of life? At this point I will need to be rather speculative, because he never addressed objections like this explicitly. But I think that one can pull together from his various remarks at least three significant lines of response.

[9] It should be noted that the sharp distinction between theoretical and practical responses may break down somewhat when it comes to responding to condition (iii).

3.1. First defence of the problematicness of life:
From the inapplicability of probabilistic calculation

The first response Wittgenstein might offer could be seen coming out of a rather surprising passage in the Koder Diaries from February 1937. He wrote:

> 'It is strange that one says God created the world & not: God is creating, continually, the world. For why should it be a greater miracle that it began to be, rather than that it continued to be. One is led astray by the simile of the craftsperson. That someone makes a shoe is an accomplishment, but once made (out of what is existing) it endures on its own for a while. But if one thinks of God as creator, must the conservation of the universe not be a miracle just as great as its creation,—yes, aren't the two one and the same?' (PPO 215)

This passage is surprising because it sounds so much like Wittgenstein is engaging in unreconstructed metaphysical argumentation of the kind that he usually rejects. But regardless of that, he is echoing a theme that had long been an important aspect of his thought – namely, the idea that the existence of the world at every moment is a miracle, and something to be wondered at. As he said in his 1929 'Lecture on Ethics': 'I will… describe the experience of wondering at the existence of the world by saying: it is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle' (LE 43).

But part of seeing the existence of whatever exists as a miracle is putting it outside the realm of what could legitimately be expected or relied upon. So if my existence – and so too the existence of the mysterious preconditions of the meaningfulness and bearableness of my life – are miracles, then these are not things that one could legitimately approach by means of statistics or probability. On this view, at each new moment the balance is poised utterly equally between whether my life will be illuminated with meaning, on the one hand, or whether it will be a harrowing experience devoid of all sense, on the other; and how my life has gone until now, and the statistics regarding how people's lives tend to go, will be no basis at all for expecting things to continue that way into the future. Wittgenstein might well say, therefore, that life is insecure down to its very core, and to think that we can consider any aspect of it to be a *likelihood* or a fairly sure thing is to miss the rather terrifying corollary of the miraculous nature of existence: that nothing can be expected. Now, while Wittgenstein would not have thought it possible to provide any *arguments* that everyone ought to consider the existence of the world to be miraculous, he might nonetheless have thought that anyone who failed to see the miracle was blind to something immensely important.

This line of thought touches on something very deep in Wittgenstein's approach to the fundamental insecurity of life, but it seems to come at quite a cost. For on this view of things it's not just life's important goods which cannot be counted on and for which calculating probabilities makes no sense, but surely it would be absolutely everything – including whether I will fall, float, or disappear if I step out of the window, and whether I will be nourished, poisoned, or turn polka-dotted, if I drink this water, and the like. Given that this approach seems to entirely undermine our standard reliance on inductive reasoning in daily life[10], we might therefore wonder whether Wittgenstein had any other ways to defend his claim about the insecurity of life against the objection that life is not *really* all that insecure and that the probabilities are with us rather than against us.

3.2. Second defence of the problematicness of life:
From decision theory and the possibility of infinite negative utility

A second approach could, then, be for Wittgenstein to grant that many of the ways in which our lives might collapse are indeed not all that likely, but to insist that the significance of a given potential collapse is a

[10] An undermining which early Wittgenstein supported (see TLP 5.134ff & 6.3631ff), but which later Wittgenstein did not (see PI §§466-90).

function both of how likely that potential collapse is and also of how bad the collapse would be if it happened. In a move analogous to Pascal's handling of infinite disutility in his famous wager (at least on some readings), we might say that if the potential awfulness is sufficiently great, then that possibility will be of great significance even if the chance of it coming to pass is fairly small[11]. And indeed, Wittgenstein repeatedly stresses that the potential for positive suffering in life – indeed in any one moment of any one life – is *infinite*. Thus, in February 1937 he wrote:

> '[I]n an instant one can experience all terror… If you want to imagine hell you don't need to think of unending torment. I would rather say: Do you know what unspeakable dread a human being is capable of? Think of that & you know what hell is even though this is not at all a matter of duration.' (PPO 179)

And in 1944:

> 'A cry of distress cannot be greater than that of *one* human being. Or again *no* distress can be greater than what a single person can suffer. Hence one human being can be in infinite distress… The whole Earth cannot be in greater distress than *one* soul… There is no greater distress to be felt than that of One human being. For if someone feels himself lost, that is the ultimate distress.' (CV 52-3)

On this approach the point about life's fundamental insecurity is neither that all the goods in our lives are very likely to collapse at any moment, nor even that they are always perfectly equally poised between the possibilities of collapse and of stability – but rather, that given the enormity of the potential suffering, the fact that collapse is possible at all, even if not overwhelmingly likely, should be enough to make anxiety about that chance a very natural and not unreasonable response.

And even if decision theorists are right to tell us that we can ignore vanishingly small possibilities for all practical purposes – even vanishingly small possibilities of enormous catastrophes – that is not the case with the kinds of collapse that Wittgenstein has in mind: for they are not vanishingly rare. Many people right now are in states of infinite torment – often people who seem to be living in perfectly comfortable circumstances – and no one is in a position to think themselves immune from such states. In short, this kind of collapse is perhaps not common, but it is a very live possibility. And given the stakes, a possibility that we might think ought to greatly concern us.

3.3. Third defence of the problematicness of life: Shifting from anxiety to outrage

Wittgenstein's third potential response could go in another direction. On this line of thought Wittgenstein could grant that the likelihood of the worst befalling each of us at any moment is not extremely high, and he might even grant that anxiety is therefore not an entirely natural response to life's fundamental insecurity. But granting all this does not undermine the problem of life, because even if anxiety is no longer so plausibly in the offing, another family of very negative states is, and this family will simply replace the role of anxiety in the problem as I laid it out earlier. These alternative negative states I have in mind are *anger* and *outrage*.

Consider, for example, that one day my neighbour tells me that he has bought a gun, and that he has decided that it's quite possible that one morning when he sees me coming out of my apartment he will simply shoot me dead. Whether or not he will do this, he explains, will depend on a decision made randomly by his computer, and he has set it so that the chances that it will tell him that he should shoot me are one in ten million. In this case, we might think that given these odds (they are *far* better than the odds of me getting his by a car as I cross the road) it is not anxiety that would be foremost amongst my responses, but rather: something like outrage. Outrage at the affront to my autonomy, outrage at the apparently pointless malice of my neighbour, outrage that something of such great significance to me could be decided so

[11] For an illuminating discussion of these matters see Jeff Jordan, *Pascal's Wager: Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 105-8 & 115-18.

capriciously, and outrage at my own impotence in the face of this threat – all this, even while recognizing that the chances of my actually being shot by my neighbour are very small indeed.

Moreover, a good number of the reasons why I might naturally feel anger or outrage at my neighbour's plan do not depend on the fact that it is a *person* who is doing this to me. For it is perfectly natural and common to feel anger and outrage at entirely impersonal forces when they put us in a similar position. For example, towards the end of a long and dark Norwegian winter in 1937, when Wittgenstein was daily and desperately waiting for the reappearance of the sun, he chided himself for his tendency to 'get angry with fate' (PPO 225).

Thus the mere fact of the insecurity of all life's goods, the mere fact that in a moment, everything of value to me could be taken from me, and that I could be left lost and bereft – regardless of the degree of likelihood – is a fact that might naturally provoke in us anger and outrage. It should not surprise us, then, that in that key month of February 1937 it was, in fact, outrage that plagued Wittgenstein more than anxiety. When, one night, the fact of his absolute dependence on external forces was brought home to him particularly sharply, he wrote: 'I was now simultaneously in a sort of shock & outrage as so often during the last 10 days' (PPO 185-7).

Given these three avenues of response to the attempt to deny either the truth or significance of the insecurity of life – and especially given the second and the third – I think we can conclude that Wittgenstein has a genuinely strong case for the problem of life being truly problematic.[12]

4. CONCLUSION: THE DIFFICULTY OF ACKNOWLEDGING THE PROBLEM

There is, of course, good reason why we would avoid admitting the reality of the problem to ourselves, why we would turn away from recognizing just how unstable everything we value actually is. After all, to acknowledge this would be to open ourselves up to precisely the overwhelming anxiety and outrage which Wittgenstein describes, and from which he suffered.

Remarkably, at almost exactly the same time as Wittgenstein was grappling with these issues in his diaries, Simone Weil was working through almost the very same things in her own notebooks – the two of them entirely unaware of one another. What Wittgenstein called 'the problem of life', Weil called 'the problem of affliction'. And Weil expresses very well the near impossibility of genuinely facing up to life's profound insecurity:

> 'To acknowledge the reality of affliction means saying to oneself: 'I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose. It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort.' To be aware of this in the depth of one's soul is to experience non-being. It is the state of extreme and total humiliation… This is why the naked spectacle of affliction makes the soul shudder as the flesh shudders at the proximity of death… Only by the supernatural working of grace can a soul pass through its own annihilation to the place where alone it can get the sort of attention which can attend to truth and to affliction.'[13]

[12] Of course, to make this case fully it would be necessary to say a great deal more about each of these points than I have just said. I intend to do this in future publications.

[13] Simone Weil, 'Human Personality', in her *Selected Essays, 1934-1943: Historical, Political, and Moral Writings*, ed. & trans. Richard Rees (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 27-8.

As I said in my introduction, making a case for the significance of the problem of our fragility will have to suffice for this paper, and investigating potential practical solutions will need to be left to another occasion[14]. If this leaves us hanging – at least for the time being – in a state of existential angst, perhaps that is not such a bad thing. For I think that Wittgenstein might have approved of Georges Sorel's remark that 'philosophy is after all perhaps only the recognition of the abysses which lie on each side of the footpath that the vulgar follow with the serenity of somnambulists.'[15, 16]

ABBREVIATIONS

BT = Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Big Typescript: TS 213*, eds. & trans. C Grant Luckhardt and Maximilian AE Aue (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005). (Using page number).

CV = Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, eds. GH von Wright and Heikki Nyman, trans. Peter Winch, revised edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). (Using page number).

PI = Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. GEM Anscombe, PMS Hacker, & Joachim Schulte (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). (Using section number).

LE = Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'A Lecture on Ethics', in his *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophical Occasions*, eds. James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1993). (Using page number).

D = Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Movements of Thought: Diaries 1930-1932, 1936-1937', in his *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Public and Private Occasions*, ed. & trans. James C Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002). (Using page number).

TLP = Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. DF Pears & BF McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2007). (Using section number).

[14] I am currently writing a book on all aspects of Wittgenstein's approach to the problem of life and its solutions.

[15] Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. TE Hulme (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1925), 6.

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